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Wendy Doniger

SITA AND HELEN,
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A COMPARATIVE STUDY

In this article, I intend to discuss the duality, the two-ness, of two sets of two women in two bodies of mythology, one from ancient India and one from ancient Greece (supplemented, in the latter case, with later European variations on the Greek theme). And I intend to make two basic points about them: first, what they have in common, and second, how they differ. The first point, the similarity, must be established before we can go on to the second, the difference; we must acknowledge that there is something to compare before we can compare it. And the similarity must be explained in one way (in terms of shared cultural assumptions, at the very least, and perhaps even more broadly shared human assumptions), the differences in other ways (in terms of the influence of different cultural factors). First I will compare the shadow Sita and the phantom Helen, then the Hindu Ahalya (seduced by the god Indra in the form of her husband) and the Greek Alcmene (seduced by Zeus in the form of her husband), and then all four.

THE SHADOW SITA

Let us begin with Sita, the heroine of the *Ramayana*. The earliest recorded version of her story, in the Sanskrit text of Valmiki (ca. 200 B.C.E.–200 C.E.), establishes this basic plot:

Sita, the wife of Prince Rama, had been born from a furrow of the earth. The demon king, Ravana, stole Sita from Rama and kept her captive on the island of Lanka for many years. When Rama finally killed Ravana and brought Sita back

home with him, both he and his people feared that her reputation, if not her chastity, had been sullied by her long sojourn in the house of another man. Rama forced her to undergo an ordeal by fire, which she survived. He reinstated her, but when, later, he doubted her again, she disappeared forever back into the earth.¹

Ravana never actually rapes Sita or, indeed, touches her at all. Another episode in Valmiki's *Ramayana* (the latest part, probably a section of afterthoughts) tell us why he does not rape Sita when he has her in his power:

One day Ravana was full of passion; he saw the celestial nymph Rambha and was crazy to have her. She reminded him that she was his daughter-in-law, more precisely the wife of the son of his brother Vaishravana. But Ravana replied, "You say you are my daughter in law. For those who have but one husband, this argument is valid, but in the world of the gods, the gods have established a law that is said to be eternal, that celestial nymphs have no appointed consorts, nor are the gods monogamous." Then he ravished her. She ran home and told her husband, Nalākubara, who said, "Since, despite your lack of love for him, he ravished you brutally, he will never be able to approach another young woman unless she shares his love; if, carried away by lust, he does violence to any woman who does not love him, his head will split into seven pieces." When Ravana learned of the curse, his hair stood on end and he ceased to indulge in uniting himself with those who had no affection for him. And the chaste married women whom he had raped rejoiced when they heard this curse.²

And that's why Ravana never touched Sita.

Elsewhere in the same book of the *Ramayana*, Ravana gets a more specific curse for lusting not for a nymph but for a good woman named Vedavati; when she resists him, he warns her that she will soon lose her youth, but she insists that she wants to marry Vishnu; infuriated, Ravana seizes her by the hair, which she cuts off with her hand that has become a sword; she throws herself into the fire and promises to be reborn for his destruction. And she is reborn as Sita.³ Earlier, Ravana has referred to this incident, saying, "I was cursed by Vedavati when I raped her before; she has been reborn as Sita; and what was predicted by Rambha, Uma, and Punjikasthala has now come to pass."⁴ Here Sita is said to be, herself, the reincarnation of the woman whom Ravana had raped, now called not Rambha but Vedavati, who was not actually raped at all. This text

¹ *Ramayana* of Valmiki, critical ed. (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1960–75), 6.103–6; Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 92.

² *Ramayana* 7.26.8–47, plus the verse excised from the Baroda edition after verse 47.

³ *Ibid.*, 7.17.1–31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, lines 6–10 excised after 6.48.7.

sexualizes Sita by giving her a sexual past (as a woman accosted, but not raped, by Ravana) and then limits that sexuality by attributing to that woman the very powers that Sita herself has: the power of the text, the power of the author's knowledge that she must not be touched. One later text spells out this power:

A beautiful maiden named Vedavati was promised that she would marry Vishnu in her next life. She went into the mountains to meditate, but Ravana came to her, grabbed her with his hand, and attempted to rape her. She, being a good woman, paralyzed him with her angry gaze; he became impotent [*jada*] in his hands and feet, and unable to say anything. Then, by the power of her yoga, she died and was reborn as Sita.⁵

But, though other texts—*Mahabharata*, *Harivamsha*, *Vishnu Purana*, and other Puranas—omit the ordeal of Sita,⁶ the fifteenth-century *Adhyatmaramayana* found it necessary to exculpate Sita even from being present in Ravana's home. Indeed, it even exculpates her from the weakness, described in the Valmiki text, of asking Rama to capture a golden deer for her, a deer who turns out to be an illusion created by the demons precisely in order to lure Rama away so that Ravana can capture Sita. This illusory deer may have inspired the *Adhyatmaramayana* to create the illusory Sita:

Rama, knowing what Ravana intended to do, told Sita, "Ravana will come to you disguised as an ascetic; put a shadow of yourself outside the hut, and stay inside the hut yourself. Live inside fire, invisible, for a year; when I have killed Ravana, come back to me as you were before." Sita obeyed; she placed an illusory Sita [*mayasita*] outside and entered the fire. This illusory Sita saw the illusory deer and urged Rama to capture it for her.⁷

Rama then pretends to grieve for Sita, pretends to fight to get her back, and lies to his brother Lakshmana, who genuinely grieves for Sita. Sita herself is never subjected to an ordeal at all: the shadow simply voluntarily enters the fire and vanishes forever, while the real Sita emerges and remains with Rama. But Rama seems to forget what he has done; he orders the illusory Sita into the fire as if she were real, and only when the gods come and remind him of his divinity (as they do in the Valmiki text) does Fire return Sita to Rama, remarking, "You made this illusory

⁵ *Brahmavaivarta Purana*, Anandasrama Sanskrit Series no. 102 (Poona, 1935), 2.14.1–59.

⁶ Frank Whaling, *The Rise of the Religious Significance of Rama* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1980), p. 138.

⁷ *Adhyatmaramayana* 3.7.1–10, trans. Rai Bahadur Nala Baij Nath, in *The Sacred Books of the Hindus* (Allahabad: The Panini Office, Bahadurganj, 1913).

Sita in order to destroy Ravana. Now he is dead, and that Sita has disappeared.”⁸

Tulsi Das’s sixteenth-century Hindi version, the *Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama*, expands upon this motif:

[Rama said to Sita] “Hearken, beloved wife, faithful, beautiful and virtuous; I am about to play an engaging game as man; do you then make your abode in fire till I have extirpated the demons.” As soon as Rama had made an end of speaking, Sita laid her lord’s feet upon her heart and entered into the fire. She left her image there, of just the same form and modest disposition as her own. Not even [Rama’s brother] Laksman knew the secret of what the Blessed Lord had done. [Ravana stole Sita, and Rama got her back and a great celebration took place.] Now, before this Rama had caused Sita to enter the fire, and now he who witnesses the secrets of all hearts desired to make her manifest again. For this reason, the Lord of all compassion issued a somewhat harsh command, whereat the female demons all began to grieve. [That is, he commanded Sita to undergo the fire ordeal.] . . . When [Sita] the princess of Videha saw the fiercely burning flames, she was glad at heart, and felt no fear. “If in my heart,” she said, “in thought and word and deed I have never left [Rama] and turned to another, then, O Fire, who knowest the thoughts of all, be thou to me as cooling sandal-wood!” . . . Her shadow and the stain of public shame were burnt up in the blazing fire. None understood the action of the Lord; in the heavens the gods, adepts and sages stood at gaze. Then Fire in bodily form took the hand of the true Sita, famed in the scriptures and the world, and brought her and committed her to Rama’s care.⁹

This episode simultaneously justifies Rama’s “somewhat harsh command” in subjecting Sita to the ordeal (by pointing out that he knew it was not the real Sita all along) and quells the uneasiness that the reader (or hearer) may well share with Rama at the thought of Sita living in Ravana’s house for so long (the “public shame” that is burnt up in the fire). Tulsi argues that Rama never intended, or needed, to test Sita (since he knew she was not in Ravana’s house at all), but has “her” enter the fire merely in order to bring the real Sita back from the fire, to make her visible again. The idea of the shadow Sita may also express sympathy for Sita and therefore protect her from the trauma of life with Ravana. Significantly, it is Rama, not Sita, who has the idea, and the power, to create her double.

But in borrowing this motif from the *Adhyatmaramayana*, Tulsi chose not to follow through on its full implications; in a sense, Tulsi’s double lacks reality, or, to put it differently, the real Sita never loses her reality.

⁸ Ibid., 6.8.21.

⁹ Tulsi Das, *Ramacaritamansa*, translated by W. D. P. Hill as *The Holy Lake of the Acts of Rama* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), D 23–24, 107–8.

Probably in order to maintain the power of the narrative, Tulsi has his Rama apparently forget about the shadow at crucial moments and genuinely grieve for Sita as if the real Sita had in fact been stolen by Rama. Moreover, as Frank Whaling points out, "Sita is very much a woman of flesh and blood in her interviews with Ravana and Hanumant. Tulsi seems to have forgotten the shadow Sita as soon as he has introduced her."¹⁰

But the double is real enough to be the object of sympathy; like Rama and Sita, she suffers. She is "a counterfeit or surrogate Sita, condemned to undergo the trials of Lanka—including the painful immersion in fire at the end of the *Ramayana* war—without ever winning the reward of suffering in the form of union with Rama."¹¹ Thus the double created in order to spare the original from suffering becomes a new original, who suffers even more than the original because she cannot have what the original was saved *for*.

In some texts, the shadow goes on to have a life of her own:

One day when Sita and Rama were in the forest, the god of Fire came to Rama, took the true Sita, and left a shadow Sita with Rama; Fire constructed an illusory Sita, with qualities, form, and limbs equal to hers, and gave her to Rama. He told Rama not to divulge the secret to anyone; even Rama's brother Lakshmana did not know. Eventually, Rama subjected Sita to the ordeal of fire and Fire restored the real Sita to Rama.

But then the shadow Sita asked Rama and Fire, "What shall I do?" Fire told her to go to the Pushkara shrine, and there she generated inner heat and was reborn as Draupadi. In the Golden Age she is called Vedavati; in the Second Age (the Treta), she is Sita. And in the Third Age (the Dvapara), the shadow is Draupadi. This shadow, who was in the prime of her youth, was so nervous and excited with lust when she asked Shiva for a husband that she repeated her request five times. And so she obtained five husbands, the five Pandavas.¹²

Here it is Fire, not Rama, who constructs the double; Rama has lost some of his agency. And it is Fire, not Rama, who gives the shadow Sita a sexual future; for when she has saved Sita from contact with Ravana, she goes on to have a life of her own, reborn as Draupadi, heroine of the other epic, the *Mahabharata*, and of many contemporary cults—a woman with five husbands, unheard of in polygynous, but never polyandrous, Hinduism. In the past, Sita herself (as Vedavati) was the victim of a promiscuous man, and in the future her shadow (as Draupadi) will be accused of promiscuity. In the present, she is split between the chaste Sita who must

¹⁰ Whaling, p. 248.

¹¹ David Shulman, "On Being a Stone: A Reading of the *Tirupati Purana*" (Jerusalem: Institute for Advanced Studies, 1990), ms. 13.

¹² *Brahmavaivarta Purana* 2.14.1–59.

be protected and the (presumably unchaste) shadow who undergoes Sita's ordeal not only with Ravana but with Rama.

A contemporary Tamil text attempts not only to save Sita (by using the surrogate) but to reward the double with a sexually satisfying future incarnation that is not, however, promiscuous:

Once Ravana had behaved in an unseemly manner toward a virtuous woman named Vedavati. She became angry and cursed him saying, "I will destroy your entire clan," and then she sought refuge with Lord Agni. Lord Agni consoled her and offered her protection. [When Ravana came to abduct Sita,] Lord Agni transformed Vedavati, who was in his care, into the likeness of Sita and carried away the real Sita, leaving Vedavati in her place. After Lord Rama had defeated Ravana and recovered Sita he was unable to bear the rumors of scandal, and so he commanded Sita, who in reality was Vedavati, to undergo trial by fire. Vedavati entered the fire as Lord Rama ordered, and at that moment Lord Agni appeared with Vedavati and the real Sita, who had been living under his protection. When he saw two identical Sitas, Lord Rama was astonished. The real Sita said, "My Lord, this woman's name is Vedavati. . . . She went with Ravana in my place and suffered unbearable hardships in Lanka. You must marry this woman who suffered so much in the Ashoka grove on our behalf." Rama answered, "O queen, you are undoubtedly aware that I have vowed that in my present incarnation as Rama I will have just one wife. But during the Kali Yuga I will assume the form of Venkateshwara. At that time this Vedavati will be born as Padmavati, daughter of Akasha Raja, and I will marry her."¹³

Vedavati now is reborn not as Sita but as Sita's shadow. Again Fire, rather than Rama, is the agent, and this time Rama is so far from masterminding the double that he does not understand what has happened at all. Now, unlike Rama in the Sanskrit texts we have just seen, Rama confronts the two doubles together. And now Sita does not merely use the surrogate to protect herself but protects the surrogate, assuming that the surrogate's sensibilities are like her own and that she, too, has rights. Generously she suggests that Rama marry them both. Rama prefers, however, to postpone this marriage to yet another incarnation, in the future. Vedavati is then reborn not as Draupadi but as Padmavati, an important Tirupati figure; thus the double takes on a persona and a rebirth, a (double) life of her own in South India, where she is said in some sources to have been set free by the god Vishnu after his wedding to her; "it, or she, roams the world still as an autonomized fragment of his divinity."¹⁴ One can imagine these texts continuing to proliferate in an infinite *mise en*

¹³ Ne. Ci. Teyvacikamani, *Sri Venkateca Makatmiyam*, trans. Norman Cutler (Chicago, 1996).

¹⁴ Shulman, "On Being a Stone," p. 13, citing I. Munucaminayutu, *Tiruppati: Tirumalai yattirai* . . . (Cittur, 1928), p. 22.

abîme, caused by the suspension of the original assumption that the double is not real, does not count, has no feelings: once that is gone, each double creates a double, just as the original did.

Why did the authors of these later texts feel that they had to give the real Sita a double—indeed, more and more doubles? Perhaps because Rama became a god, and people who had been bothered for a long time about his treatment of Sita even when he was just a man could not allow their god to treat his woman so badly. Moreover, attitudes to women changed, too, and the growing Hindu obsession with the chastity of women reached a particularly fanatical climax after the Muslim invasions, the time in which the Hindi and Tamil texts were composed. The need to protect Sita's chastity from demons (read: Hindu women's chastity from Muslims) was answered by the appropriation of the motif of the surrogate, which was, as we shall soon see, already available in the literature.

The idea of creating an illusory Sita may indicate that the original Sita was very real indeed or that there was a perceived need to reject the reality of the original Sita. If an illusory Sita substitutes for a Sita who is originally illusory herself, the Sita who is captured is a double illusion, *maya* squared—or, if two negatives cancel one another out, a reality. There were ways of protecting Sita without creating a magical double, as both Kampan's Tamil *Ramayana* and the Tibetan *Ramayana* demonstrate, by devising other stratagems.¹⁵ The double Sita was the preferred device, however, because of its deep resonance with other aspects of the *Ramayana*. For there are many illusory Sitas, shadow Sitas, even in Valmiki's Sanskrit text. The demon Indrajit, son of Ravana, produces a false image of Sita and uses it to fool Rama.¹⁶ A golden image of Sita appears at the end of the *Ramayana*, after Sita's final disappearance: "Rama never sought another consort, but in every sacrifice a golden image of Sita took the place of the wife."¹⁷ There are also double Ravana's: in order to seduce Sita, he takes the form not of Rama but of an ascetic, and *Sita is fooled*.¹⁸ She succumbs not to his sexual temptations but simply to the belief that he is not Ravana but a Brahmin, yet this is enough to make her vulnerable to him, to draw her out of the charmed circle of Rama's protection. She has already been fooled by a demon (in the form of the golden deer) who mimicked Rama's voice, and she ignored Lakshmana's wise warning that it was merely a demonic imitation.¹⁹

¹⁵ See Camille J. Bulcke, *Ram-Katha: Utpatti aur Vikas* (Allahabad: Hindi Parisad Visvavidyala, 1950), p. 345, as cited by Whaling, p. 126.

¹⁶ *Ramayana* 6.68.1–23.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.89.4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.44.31–33.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.42.14, 3.43.1–10.

The complex doublings of Sita grow in part out of the doctrine of illusion that is woven throughout all *Ramayanas*.²⁰ But they are also inspired by a very deep ambiguity in the attitude to Sita herself. On the one hand, she is the epitome of female chastity. On the other hand, as the *Ramayana* came to play a major role in political rhetoric in later Indian history, Sita began to look too good to be true—or too good to be good. Thus, according to one Dravidian reinterpretation: “Sita . . . is Ravana’s paramour who did not resist but ‘clung like a vine’ when she was abducted.”²¹ Whether Sita struggled or clung has become, like many other points in this epic, a matter for bitter, even violent dispute. We will return to this question of struggling versus clinging in the reception of the texts about Ahalya and Alcmena.

THE PHANTOM HELEN

Let us leave ancient India now, for a little while, and turn to ancient Greece, and Helen.

A close narrative parallel to the shadow Sita is provided by the story of Helen of Troy and her phantom double. But there is one essential difference between the two stories: where Sita was innocent, Helen is guilty of the sexual betrayal of which she is accused: Homer tells us, in both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, that she fell for the Trojan Paris and ran off with him, leaving her Greek husband, King Menelaus, and thereby triggering the Trojan War, ostensibly fought to bring her back to Greece. (Marlowe put his finger on Helen’s importance when he wrote of her, “Was this the face that launch’d a thousand ships / And burnt the topless towers of Ilium?”)²² In Homer, there is no talk of another Helen taking her place in Troy. Yet Homer may well have known about the phantom Helen, for the theme is pre-Homeric, on the evidence of related texts, such as the story in the *Rig Veda* (ca. 1000 B.C.) about the goddess Saranyu, who left a double in her place when she abandoned her husband, the sun.²³ Helen is like Saranyu not only in having (in post-Homeric texts) a shadow double (called an *eidolon* in Greek, a ghost or shadow or image) but in her relationship with the Dioscuri or Gemini, the half-

²⁰ O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (n. 1 above), pp. 92–97.

²¹ Lloyd Rudolph, “Urban Life and Populist Radicalism: Dravidian Politics in Madras,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (May 1961): 288.

²² Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, scene 14.

²³ See Wendy Doniger O’Flaherty, *Women, Androgynes, and Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), pp. 172–84; and Wendy Doniger, “Sexual Masquerades in Hindu Myths: Aspects of the Transmission of Knowledge in Ancient India,” in *The Transmission of Knowledge in South Asia*, ed. Nigel Crook (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 28–48, and “Saranyu/Samjna: The Sun and the Shadow,” in *Devi: Goddesses of India*, ed. John Stratton Hawley and Donna Wulff (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 154–72.

equine twins who are the Greek counterpart to the Ashvins, Saranyu's twin sons, and who are Helen's brothers. The equine imagery of Helen is maintained in a key Homeric episode in which Helen tempts the men trapped inside the Trojan horse, the horse pregnant with death for the Trojans, and almost succeeds in betraying the Greeks inside it, her countrymen, by impersonating the voices of their wives (*Iliad* 4.273)—doubling, aurally, as their wives.

Otto Skutsch, apologetically reviving the solar mythology of Max Müller, remarks that it "can hardly be an accident that [Saranyu] the woman associated with the Asvins was replaced by an *eidolon* just as [Helen] the sister of the Dioscuri was."²⁴ In support of this contention, he remarks that the identity of Saranyu and Helen was first suspected by Sanskritists in the last century;²⁵ so, too, Sita was compared to Helen by A. H. Krappe in 1931²⁶ and by Cristiano Grottanelli in 1982²⁷—but on grounds other than their doubling. M. L. West suggested that Helen went away to the south (Egypt) like the sun, and that she is solar in other ways, as well;²⁸ one late and rather dubious Greek source even asserts that Helen's father was not Zeus but the Sun.²⁹ Helen's name may even be related to Saranyu (through the Sanskrit *sarana*, "swift"). If this is so, then the ancient story of a shadow double—the story of the goddess Saranyu—may have inspired, or at least been available to, authors of the texts about both Sita and Helen.

But Helen, even in Homer, is duplicitous in the basic sexual sense of the word: she has two men, her husband and her lover. Indeed, she has two lovers; when Paris dies, she replaces him with Deiphobus. The multiplicity of Helen inspired Arthur Adkins to quip that there is only one precise measure in Greek philology, and that is the milli-helen, the precise quantity of energy it takes to launch a ship.³⁰ Helen also has two fathers—Zeus and Tyndareus, and two mothers—Leda and Nemesis. Thus, "Doubleness is the distinguishing mark of her entire tradition."³¹ Moreover, Helen is both doubling and doubled, both mimicked and mimicker.

²⁴ Otto Skutsch, "Helen: Her Name and Nature," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102 (1987): 188–93, esp. 189.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 189, citing J. Ehni in 1890 and V. Pisani in 1928.

²⁶ A. H. Krappe, "Lancelot et Guenièvre," in *Revue celtique* 48 (1931): 92–123.

²⁷ Cristiano Grottanelli, "The King's Grace and the Helpless Woman: A Comparative Study of the Stories of Ruth, Charila, Sita," *History of Religions* 22, no. 1 (1982): 1–24.

²⁸ M. L. West, "Immortal Helen" (inaugural lecture at Bedford College, London, 1975), cited by Skutsch, p. 189.

²⁹ Ptolemy Chennos, preserved in Ptoleios's *Bibliothèque* 149a; Skutsch, p. 189.

³⁰ Cited by Matthew Adkins at the memorial service for Arthur Adkins, Rockefeller Memorial Chapel, the University of Chicago, March 13, 1996.

³¹ Norman Austin, *Helen of Troy and Her Shameless Phantom* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994), p. 115, citing Ann Bergren, p. 19.

Homer seems to assume that the real Helen went to Troy with Paris, leaving Menelaus with no wife at all. Aeschylus, however, in the *Agamemnon*, speaks of Menelaus as having a kind of shadow Helen while the real Helen was, presumably, in Troy (as she is in Homer's telling):

Through yearning for the one gone over the sea,
a ghost will seem to rule the house . . .
Fancies haunt him in dreams persuasively;
theirs is a grace without substance.
Unsubstantial it is, when one sees,
and dreaming reaches to the touch,
and the phantom is gone,
quickly slipping though his hands,
as it follows the winged paths of sleep.³²

Other traditions, from Homer on, assumed that Menelaus was left with no wife at all when Paris took her away. But where was she?

Herodotus maintained that the real Helen was not in Troy. She had run off with Paris, but a storm had cast them ashore in Egypt; she was kept there, protected by Proteus, while Paris returned home empty-handed; when the Greeks captured the walls, "There was no Helen!" And he reasons, "If Helen had been in Ilium, she would have been given back to the Greeks, whether Alexander wanted it so or not."³³ Herodotus accuses Homer of knowingly suppressing the story of Helen's absence from Troy. But Herodotus says nothing about a false Helen; the whole point of his story is that there was *no* Helen in Troy, that the entire Trojan War was fought in vain, for a woman who was not even *there*. Nor does Herodotus save the real Helen from being seduced by Paris; Proteus takes Helen only after the lovers have presumably consummated their adultery (though Herodotus remarks, ambiguously, that Helen was brought back from Egypt "unharm[ed] [*apathea kakon*]").³⁴ Elsewhere, Herodotus says that the Persians said that Helen (like other women) *willingly* ran off with Paris: "Clearly, the women would not have been carried off had they no mind to be."³⁵

The phantom Helen, who absolves the real Helen of adultery, is first mentioned in a palinode by Stesichorus, a text lost to us except for its citations by Plato, who cites three verses in the *Phaedrus* (243a): "When

³² Aeschylus, *Agamemnon* lines 416–24; in *The Oresteia*, trans. David Grene and Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

³³ Herodotus, *History*, trans. David Grene (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). 2.112–20.

³⁴ Herodotus 1.119.

³⁵ Herodotus 1.4.

he was struck blind for accusing Helen, Stesichorus, unlike Homer, recognized the cause, for he was well educated, and immediately he composed his Palinode: 'The story [*logos*] is not true. You did not board the well-benched ships. You did not reach the towers of Troy.' This text agrees with Herodotus in asserting that Helen was absent from Troy. It compares the blindness of Stesichorus and Homer, implying that Homer remained blind because he thought the real Helen went to Troy—or worse, according to Herodotus, knew the real story and suppressed it. But where Herodotus got Helen as far as Egypt with Paris, Stesichorus kept her at home, presumably in Sparta. And from another passage in Plato we learn that Stesichorus also gave Helen a phantom stand-in at Troy: "Stesichorus says the phantom of Helen was fought for at Troy through ignorance of the truth."³⁶ Thus Paris was fooled, while, presumably, the real Helen stayed home safe at Sparta, and Menelaus was never fooled. Greek honor is saved.

But is the problem really solved? Norman Austin thinks not: "The Palinode's project, to remove the dishonor from the traditional story by ascribing all Helen's ambiguity to her simulacrum, far from resolving Helen's ambivalences, had the unwitting effect of making Helen into a ghost of her own ghost, the negative of a negative. . . . The only reason for this Helen's being was to be not-Helen of Troy."³⁷ Or, in Froma Zeitlin's words, "As fiction *eidolon*, Stesichorus' Helen acquires the capacity to impersonate herself."³⁸ Indeed, Stesichorus may have told his story not primarily to let Helen off the hook (she was, after all, one of the most famous whores of antiquity) but, rather, to extend Herodotus's cynical point about war: now Helen is not merely absent from Troy, but absent from the adulterous bed that was the excuse for the war. As Austin points out, "Only one question, in the end, held any force: Was Helen ever in another man's bed who was not her husband? Sparta, Egypt, Troy—who cared about the place? The question was not *where* but *whether*."³⁹

Euripides's play, *Helen*, reconciled the assertions of Herodotus (that Helen was not at Troy, but in Egypt) and Stesichorus (that Helen was not at Troy, but in Sparta, while her phantom was at Troy), by adding two essential details: the phantom replaced Helen in Sparta and was taken to Troy, so that the real Helen not only never reached Egypt with Paris, as Herodotus had said, but also never even slept with Paris; she was

³⁶ Plato, *Republic* 586 C [2.365 C]; cf. *Republic* 598 B 6 ff.

³⁷ Austin, p. 10.

³⁸ Froma Zeitlin, "Travesties of Gender and Genre in Aristophanes' *Thermophoriazousae*," in *Representations of Women in Antiquity*, ed. Helene Foley (New York and London: Gordon & Breach, 1981), pp. 169–217, esp. p. 202.

³⁹ Austin, p. 99.

magically transported from Sparta to Egypt. No longer is she, as in Homer and Herodotus, the willing adulteress; she would have been carried off against her will, it is implied (though never actually stated. . .), and the phantom was created to save her from an alliance she did not want. Menelaus had captured the phantom at Troy and lived with it in a cave for seven years (never noticing the difference); then he came to Egypt and met the real Helen. At that moment, the gods dissolved the phantom back into mist; Helen announced that the “evil thing” that was sent to Troy in her place, the piece of cloud, had been returned to the Ether (*Helen*, lines 1218–19).⁴⁰ Austin puts the point well: “The *eidolon* has played its part to perfection, as a most subtle *deus ex machina*, floating in and out of the play to resolve the complications.”⁴¹ Thus, as Helen herself claims at the start of the play, she never committed adultery:

Hera gave Paris not me, but a breathing image [*eidolon*] made in likeness to me, made out of air, and he thinks he has me, but has a useless seeming. Hermes caught me up in folds of air, veiled by cloud, and set me down in the halls of Proteus . . . and I will still make my home in Sparta with my husband, and he will know I never went to Troy, never spread a bed for any man (*Helen*, lines 31–67).

Later, Helen tells Menelaus that Hera made her image out of air so that Paris would not have her and that he, Menelaus, had had in the cave a bed worked by the gods (*Helen*, lines 582–88). Menelaus has already told us how he seized Helen from Troy and hid “the woman” in the depths of a cave (*Helen*, line 425), a phrase reminiscent simultaneously of the over-sexed women who lurk in hollow caves throughout the *Odyssey* (Calypso at 1.15, Scylla at 12.82) and of the shadow images in Plato’s caves.

Austin finds this trick hard to take:

At the risk of being thought ungracious, we might question the motives for such bed making, which leaves Menelaus with a cloud for his bedmate in order to punish Paris. . . . He may have mistakenly fought at Troy for a phantom—the woman-as-name—since he did not see her but only assumed she was in Troy. But to ask him to believe that for the past seven years he has enjoyed not Helen’s body but her name is to impose on him an ontology too steep for his comprehension.⁴²

Indeed, Menelaus is, understandably, confused. He admits that he was “tricked by the gods” when he held in his arms “a miserable piece of cloud” (*Helen*, line 703). He “recognizes that he has been sleeping with

⁴⁰ Euripides, *Helen*, Loeb Library, with an English translation by Arthur S. Way (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966).

⁴¹ Austin, p. 167.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 162.

but a name, compounded of conceits and lies.”⁴³ In this episode, as in Aeschylus’s *Agamemnon*, Menelaus, rather than Paris, is the one who is fooled by the phantom. When he sees Helen he says things like “I never saw a more resembling form” and “I see you as most like Helen, my lady.” But when she remarks on his astonishing resemblance to Menelaus and welcomes him back, “after such a long time, to the arms of your wife,” Menelaus shies away and tells her to take her hands off him. He insists that he has only one wife, “the one hidden in the cave,” though he admits that Helen’s body is very much like hers (which is not surprising since Helen has apparently not aged a day since she left Sparta [*Helen*, line 161]). Menelaus is finally convinced only when one of the doubles vanishes back into the ether from which it came (assuming that the one frail enough to vanish was the false one): a messenger comes and says that, just now, his “wife” vanished from the secret cave, declaring that she was nothing but a phantom, an empty *eidolon*, and saying, “You thought Paris had Helen, but he never did. The daughter of Tyndareus did nothing, though evil things are said of her.” Only then does Menelaus say, “The stories [*logoi*] told by this woman fit, and are true” (*Helen*, line 622)—which is, together with Helen’s insistence that “I never went to the land of Troy” (*Helen*, line 575), an almost verbatim repetition of Stesichorus’s recantation: “The story [*logos*] is not true. You did not go to Troy.”

In Euripides’ *Helen*, as in all Greek tragedies, the parts of women were played by men. In Aristophanes’ *Thesmophoriazousae*, the men play the women’s parts in the play within the play; Euripides persuades his kinsman Mnesilochos to dress in women’s clothes in order to spy on the women who are plotting against him; but Mnesilochos is discovered and offers, then, to play Helen in Euripides’ play, while Euripides himself plays Menelaus. But when the two speak a number of lines from Euripides’ play, they are interrupted by comic remarks from other characters who refuse to accept the stage convention that the actors are people other than their real identities. Thus where, in the Euripides play, the joke was that there were two Helens with one name, here the joke is in the flat-footed refusal to let one actor play two parts (his real-life identity and the character in the play). As Zeitlin puts it: “The *eidolon* of Helen is neither visible nor even mentioned in the parody. Nevertheless, as the personification of illusion itself, the phantom figure hovers over the entire scene.”⁴⁴ Indeed, the illusion of Helen continued to hover over Western literature; Helen in Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* and Goethe’s *Faust* is a different sort of ghost, the phantom of all losses, the phantom of beauty and perfection.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 165.

⁴⁴ Zeitlin, pp. 394, 408.

SITA AND HELEN

Let us now consider the reasons why the same story should have been constructed and applied to the hated whore of ancient Greece and the revered chaste wife of ancient India; in essence, these two traditions tell the same story about two diametrically opposed women. Was Freud right about the inevitable connection between the whore and the madonna? Let us consider the ways in which the two women, and the two stories, are similar and different.

Both Sita and Helen are the subjects of a series of texts which find it necessary to deny their presence at the scene of the sexual crime. Both Hindu and Greek traditions resorted to the story of the surrogate double to generate a revisionist history of a central episode, a rape, in the Epic, but for very different reasons. For when we look closer, we see that the two traditions tell “the same story” so differently that it is only in the most brutal, basic structures of the plot that they continue to resemble one another. Sita is innocent of any lust, merely the victim of Ravana’s lust; Helen is less seduced against than seducing. Sita never does sleep with Ravana, in any ancient South Asian text that I know; Helen certainly does sleep with Paris in Homer, if not in some later texts. Sita proves her chastity and, in some texts, vanishes forever, leaving Rama miserable (and, one hopes, very sorry that he behaved so badly); Helen acknowledges her promiscuity and lives with Menelaus until, presumably, old age; we meet them in their uneasy domesticity, long after the Trojan War, in the *Odyssey* (4.121). Helen, though the daughter of a god (Zeus), is not a goddess; Sita, though technically parentless (she sprang out of a furrow), becomes a goddess by the time of Tulsi and behaves very much like one even in Valmiki’s text.⁴⁵ Sita is fooled by Ravana and fooled by the demons who mimic Rama’s voice; Helen fools others and successfully mimics the voices of the wives of the Greeks inside the Trojan horse.

But in later tellings, Helen becomes Sita, the chaste woman whose chastity is protected by her double; more precisely, both Sita and Helen become Saranyu, a paradigm available to both. (Or, as one might argue, both Saranyu and Helen are indebted to a lost proto-Indo-European original.)⁴⁶ And Saranyu can serve as the model for both the Greek whore and the Hindu wife because Saranyu herself is sexually ambivalent—either more or less sexual than her husband, depending on how you calculate,

⁴⁵ See Cornelia Dimmitt, “Sita: Mother Goddess and Sakti,” in *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India*, ed. Donna Wulff and John Stratton Hawley, Religious Studies Series (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1982), pp. 210–23; and O’Flaherty, *Dreams, Illusion, and Other Realities* (n. 1 above), pp. 92–97.

⁴⁶ This is an argument that I advanced in *Women, Androgynes, and Other Mythical Beasts* (n. 23 above), but I find it more comfortable now to argue for simple ancient Indian and Greek contacts.

or who you ask. Sita, too, is ambivalent in her sexuality, especially in the Tamil tradition;⁴⁷ the demoness Shurpanakha is able to double for Sita, David Shulman suggests, because both of them are highly sexual women. Certainly, as we have seen, Ravana is able to abduct Sita, if not to seduce her, because she fell for his masquerade, not as Rama but as an ascetic. But Sita is fooled, and therefore innocent, where Helen fools, and is guilty: this is a paradigm to which we will return.

It is not just that the two traditions are different; they are actually quite close, focusing on the same issues, but they say diametrically opposed things about those issues. The Greek war was situated, and was recognized as being situated, in history; when history changed, the war had to be denied. The Hindu war was quickly appropriated by religion; even when history changed, the war did not have to be denied. By removing Helen, the Greeks problematized the Trojan War, emptied it of its superficial meaning as a war fought for a woman, and opened the way for a new discourse on the futility of war and/or the hollowness of female beauty. The texts about the phantom Helen were composed at a time when the Greeks were again at war, no longer with the Trojans but now with Sparta (Helen's Home), and were questioning the justice of that war (and arguing that it was an extension of the Trojan War). Euripides' *The Trojan Women* (415), in which women explicitly called into question the values of war, was roughly contemporaneous with his *Helen* (412), and Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (411), and made the same point about the Peloponnesian War. It made sense to use the image of Helen to problematize the paradigmatic Trojan War and, by implication, the present wars as well.

By contrast, it was by removing Sita that the Hindus deproblematized (if I may coin a term) the war with Ravana, denying the demon any power at all over the wife of a hero who had become an incarnate God, opening the way for the worship of a man no longer seen as hollow in his mistrust of his wife's beauty. Sita was, in the *Ramayana*, the original excuse for the war, as Helen was for Troy: but Sita was used in what we would nowadays call entrapment, set up precisely so that Ravana would fall in love with her and steal her, thus giving Rama an excuse to destroy him. Yet the Hindus never questioned the futility of that war, for it became a holy war, invoked, even in our day (1991, to be precise), to justify the destruction of the Babri mosque said to have been built on Rama's birthplace.

The two traditions were able to revise their myths because, for very different reasons, the earliest texts (the Epics, the *Ramayana*, and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*) were not dogmatically fixed. The Hindu text was regarded

⁴⁷ David Shulman, "Sita and Satakantharvana in a Tamil Folk Narrative," *Journal of Indian Folkloristics* 2 (1979): 1–26.

as part of *smṛiti*, human memory, and hence malleable (in contrast with *shruti*, divinely inspired texts such as the Vedas, of which not a syllable could be changed). The Greek text was part of a tradition that was, from the start, of uncertain piety (as Paul Veyne pointed out in his well-named study, *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?*). In both traditions, the myths moved through a number of different genres (from Epic to Purana to devotional poetry, in the Hindu tradition, from Epic to drama to satire, in the Greek) in which changes were inevitable—in which they were, indeed, the whole point of the exercise.

By examining the history of the revisions of the two episodes that are superficially the same (a surrogate is found for the abducted heroine; the king must retrieve his abducted wife and kill her abductor), we come to understand how very different the two Epic traditions are, despite their superficial resemblance. Like the two shadow women and the women whom they imitate and replace, the two sets of texts look alike only on the surface.

AHALYA

Let us turn now to two stories about a woman who is not doubled herself but who is, rather, tested by a god who doubles her husband. And let us again begin with India and move to Greece.

The story of Ahalya is one of a number of stories in which the god Indra, king of the gods, impersonates a human husband in order to gain sexual access to a human woman, assuming the form of a particular man in order to commit adultery with the man's wife. Indra shares this propensity with Zeus and Wotan, his Greek and German cousins and counterparts. In many myths of this type, the human woman succeeds in seeing through the illusion in order to remain faithful to her husband. But in the myth of Ahalya, this point is debated. Some variants insist that she could not tell the difference between them; other variants, however, imply that she merely pretended not to see through the illusion in order to sleep with the god.

The question of whether or not the woman chooses to commit adultery is further related to the question of guilt: Who is responsible? Who is punished? In ancient India, these two questions received two different answers. The law books regard the mistaking of another woman for one's own wife as a real possibility. Medhatithi says that the punishment for a man who has slept with his guru's wife—the ultimate incest in Hinduism—applies in a certain case if it was done “with premeditation, because he mistook her for his own wife.”⁴⁸ Medhatithi does not, however,

⁴⁸ Medhatithi, commenting on *The Laws of Manu* 11.106. See *The Laws of Manu: A New Translation of the Manavadharmasastra*, trans. Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1991).

contemplate the possibility that a wife might be forgiven for making the same mistake about her husband. In *The Laws of Manu*, it is the man who is primarily punished for adultery, yet in the myths, adulterous women are often mutilated or killed. The woman is regarded as naturally responsible on the assumption that all women are seductive, just as all snakes bite; but the man is culturally responsible: knowing that all women are seductive, the male adulterer is at fault when a woman is allowed to do what she is naturally inclined to do. In keeping with this pattern, the tests describe the punishments of both Ahalya and her lover Indra at some length, and these punishments, in many variants of the myth, have implications for the future history of humankind tantamount to the implications of the sin of Adam and Eve in Eden.

In one of the earliest tellings, in the *Ramayana*,⁴⁹ there seems to be no masquerade at all: Indra simply takes Ahalya by force; she was raped (*gharshita*). But subsequent texts tell us that Indra masqueraded as Ahalya's husband, Gautama. This change is made when the *Ramayana* tells the story again in the context of the coming of Rama (whose miraculous power identifies this passage as a later layer of the *Ramayana*). It is an innovation, building on the earlier Vedic texts in which Indra is certainly a sexual trickster but not actually a sexual masquerader, *stricto sensu*. Yet, even now that Indra half-heartedly masquerades as Gautama, Ahalya is, nevertheless, even more deeply implicated than she was when she was raped by Indra in his own form:

The thousand-eyed Indra, the husband of Indrani, knowing that Gautama was absent, put on the sage's garments and said to Ahalya, "Well-made woman, with a beautiful waist, men who want it do not wait for a woman's fertile period. I want to make love with you." Knowing that it was the thousand-eyed god in the garments of the sage, the foolish woman consented, because she was sexually curious about the king of the gods. Then, when her inner heart had gotten what it wanted, she said to the best of the gods, "You have gotten what you wanted; now you must go away quickly. Lord of the gods, my lover, you must always protect yourself and me."

Indra laughed and said to Ahalya, "You have wonderful hips, and I am fully satisfied. I will go back where I came from." And so, after he had made love with her he came out of the hut, hastening in some confusion, worrying about Gautama. But he saw the great sage Gautama entering, full of the power of his ascetic inner heat and unassailable by gods or demons, still damp with the water from his bathing place and blazing like a fire. When the lord of the gods saw him he was terrified and his face fell, but when the virtuous sage saw the wicked thousand-eyed god wearing the garments of the sage, he said, in anger, "You fool, since you have taken my form and done what should not be done, you shall be without your fruit." And as soon as the great-souled Gautama had said this in anger, at that very moment the two testicles of the thousand-eyed god fell down.

⁴⁹ *Ramayana* 7.30.17–36.

When Gautama had cursed Indra, he also cursed his wife: “You will live here for many thousands of years, eating wind, without any food, lying on ashes and generating inner heat. Invisible to all creatures, you will live in this hermitage. And when Rama, who is unassailable, comes to this terrible forest, then you will be purified. By receiving him as a guest you will become free of greed and delusion, you evil woman, and you will take on your own form in my presence, full of joy.”⁵⁰

Indra is eventually restored with the testicles of a ram. But the fact that he really just dresses up as Gautama (assuming his *vesha*, his garments, which does not necessarily imply a change of form, just a change of costume) serves merely to make Ahalya’s sin all the more obvious. The text explicitly tells us that she knew who he was, that she desired him precisely because she knew who he was. Invisibility is, in a sense, merely a variant of the curse in the first text: to have the same beauty as other women is to become invisible. When Indra did, at least, try to disguise himself, Ahalya was cursed to become invisible, for a while; when he simply used brute force, she was cursed to share her beauty with other women. It doesn’t really make much difference at all; Indra might have saved himself the bother.

Several of the manuscripts of the first *Ramayana* text, about the rape and the origin of adultery, insert a brief paragraph (rejected by the critical edition, and probably folded back in from the second *Ramayana* version) in which Indra masquerades successfully and Ahalya herself insists on her innocence, insists that she was fooled:

Ahalya begged Gautama, the great sage, to forgive her, saying, “I was raped, great sage, by the god who had taken your form, because I did not know (who it was). I did not do it out of desire, great sage; you should forgive me.” When Ahalya had said this to Gautama, he replied, “When Rama is born and comes to the forest, and you see him, then you will be purified. When you receive him as a guest you may come back into my presence, and you will live with me.”⁵¹

Gautama may or may not believe her; he modifies her curse in the same terms that he used in the second text, when it was clear that she was not fooled at all. And the modification does not make a great deal of sense: since the curse was the loss of her unique beauty, being purified and permitted the luxury of living with Gautama hardly seem an adequate compensation.

In later retellings, Ahalya continues to know that she is committing adultery, and, as in the first *Ramayana* text, Indra does not even bother to

⁵⁰ *Ramayana* 1.47.15–31.

⁵¹ *Ramayana*, verses excised after 7.30.36.

change into the form, or even the wardrobe, of Gautama. One such variant is found in *The Ocean of the Rivers of Story* (the *Kathasaritsagara*), a medieval Sanskrit text; when caught *in flagrante*, Indra takes the form of a cat, and Ahalya says she is with “the cat” or “my lover.” This ambiguity is made possible because she replies to her husband’s awkward question in a Prakrit dialect; being a woman, she is forbidden to speak Sanskrit, but she uses this disability as a weapon. For *majjao* (“the tom-cat”) may be a dialect version of either of two Sanskrit words: *mad-jaro*, meaning, “my lover,” or *marjaro*, meaning, “the cat” (from the verb *mrij*, to wash, because the cat constantly washes itself).⁵² But since Ahalya both lied and did not lie (it was her lover, but in the form of a cat), she is given a modified curse, which is, appropriately, another pun, on “stone”; Gautama says, “Since you behave like a rolling stone [literally, since you have an evil nature, *shiila*], you will become a stone [*shilaa*] for a long time, until Rama comes into this forest and you see him.” The logic of the curse that turned Ahalya to stone may also be at work in the practice of depicting voluptuous women in the stone sculptures on Hindu temples: it is the best way to capture and control them. (Is this why Lot’s wife was turned to a pillar of salt?). In contemporary wedding ceremonies in Sri Lanka, Ahalya appears as a black stone which the bride touches with, appropriately, her foot.

In other texts, however, Indra goes to great pains to fool Ahalya:

All the four guardians of the quarters, including Indra, lusted for Ahalya. One day, when Gautama had gone to bathe and Ahalya was cleaning the house, preparing to make the offering to the gods, Indra took the corporeal [*gatrena*] form of Gautama and excitedly entered the house. Wearing the garments of the sage, he said to Ahalya, “I am overwhelmed by Kama, the god of erotic love. Give me a kiss and so forth.” But Ahalya replied, “My lord, you should not tell me to abandon the worship of the gods and so forth. This is not the right time for such things.” Indra said, “Enough of this talk. What should and should not be done is decided by a husband’s words. You should obey your husband’s command, especially in matters of sex. Give me an embrace and so forth.” Then he embraced her and fulfilled his desire. [When Gautama returned and accused them,] Ahalya, his chaste wife, said, through her tears, “You should forgive this act, since it was committed in ignorance.” But he replied, “You have committed evil and become impure by having intercourse with another man. For a long time you will stand alone, made of nothing but skin and bones, with no flesh and no nails, and let all the men and women look at you.” In misery, she asked him, “Please set an end to this curse,” and even the sage was flooded by pity, and he said, “When Rama comes to the forest and sees you standing by the path, dried out and bodiless, he

⁵² *Kathasaritsagara* (Bombay: Nirnara Sagara Press, 1930) 17.137–48; *The Ocean of Story*, ed. N. M. Penzer, trans. C. W. Tawney, 10 vols. (London: Chas. J. Sawyer, 1924), 2:46.

will laugh and ask, 'Who is this female with the dried up form, a mere image (of a woman) made of bones?' And when he hears what happened in former times, Rama will say, 'This woman is not at all at fault; it is Indra's fault.' And when he says this, you will lose your disgusting form and take on a divine form and come to my house." And so she dwells with Gautama in heaven even today.⁵³

Ahalya in this text believes that she is with her husband. Indeed, in this quasi-feminist version of the story, it is Ahalya herself, rather than Gautama, who is engaged in an act of piety at the time of the seduction; since she is worshipping the gods, presumably the Vedic gods, the ritual is fulfilled more literally than one might ordinarily expect, or indeed hope, and Indra comes to her in person (albeit in disguise). (On one occasion, Indra masqueraded as the stallion in the horse sacrifice in order to sleep with the sacrificer's queen, a transformation that further connects him with the corpus of Saranyu the mare.)⁵⁴ Her protest that this is not the right time for sex (the South Asian equivalent of, "I have a headache") is an inversion of the amorous male's (or female's) argument, voiced in many versions of the Ahalya myth, that a woman's fertile season *is* the right time, whether or not she has a headache.

Yet this Ahalya is fooled; she really does not know it is Indra and hence does not (as in *The Ocean of the Rivers of Story*) fabricate any half-lie about a cat (though Indra again becomes a cat). Gautama admits (through a projection into Rama's words) that it was all Indra's fault, and even acknowledges that Ahalya's mind was pure—though he himself still curses her for being the helpless victim, for having been physically polluted, or, perhaps, unconsciously "asking for it" by being beautiful. His curse makes her not invisible but hideously old, which comes to the same thing: her youth and beauty vanish. (Sita, too, was rendered invisible when she was merely vulnerable to a rape.) Yet Ahalya is also cursed to have people look at her or, rather, to look at her invisibility, the final humiliation.

In yet another version of the story, Ahalya both does and does not recognize Indra:

One day the sage Narada described Ahalya to Indra, saying, "Once upon a time in the world of death I saw Gautama with Ahalya. No one has beauty like hers, not even the Shadow Samjna [Saranyu], the wife of the Sun." Indra resolved to have her. He became Gautama and came to the sage's hermitage and saw Ahalya at a time when Gautama had gone to bathe. He went inside and said, "Wife, prepare a lovely bed for us!" Then she said, "Why have you stopped reciting [the

⁵³ *Padma Purana*, Anandasrama Sanskrit Series no. 131 (Poona, 1893), 1.56.15–53.

⁵⁴ *Harivamsha* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1969) 111.11–29; see Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Other Peoples' Myths: The Cave of Echoes* (New York: Macmillan, 1988; reprint, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 102–3.

Vedas] and come home now? How did you conceive this most despicable desire to make love during the day?" Gautama [*sic*] said, "As soon as I began to bathe, a lovely nymph came there to bathe alone and appeared naked within my sight. Her lower lip was like the bilva fruit, her body was exquisite, and she had superb full breasts. Lovely lady, my heart was oppressed by the arrows of the god of erotic love, and I could not stick to my recitations. So I came back to the hermitage. Make love with me now, my darling! Or else you will see me dead, burnt by the fire of desire, or I will curse you and go away." Ahalya said, "I will obey your command, because a woman has no duty but to obey her husband."

Believing that he was her own husband because of his voice, body, and unconscious gestures, Ahalya got into the bed to make love with Indra, the god who bears the thunderbolt. Without hesitation, Indra, in the shape of Gautama, played with her, kissing and embracing her, unfastening her waistband, and so forth. But when she smelled his celestial fragrances she became startled and very doubtful. In her mind she reasoned, "Is this a man who has taken on a deceptive form? He could become a severe stain on me like the stain on the moon." And in anger she asked that rogue, "Who are you in this deceptive form? I was convinced it was my husband's form. Speak, or I will curse you."

When he heard this, Indra displayed his own shape [*vapus*], because he was frightened of a curse, and he said, "Know that I am Indra, the husband of Indrani." When she heard this, the sage's wife became furious and said, seeming to vomit a flame from her mouth, "Because your shape was his, you fool, you idiot, I don't know what will happen when my husband arrives. You have shattered my fidelity to my husband, you evil wretch. What will happen to me when I am cursed by Gautama's voice?"

Gautama came home and called to her to bring him water. She came and told him what had happened: "The depraved Indra, lord of the gods, assumed your form. Mistakenly thinking that it was certainly you, I obeyed your command exactly. But when I smelled his celestial fragrances, I became uncertain once again and said, 'Evil man, tell me who you are.' . . . Forgive me this transgression. It is not a fault when one declares it oneself, but only when someone else declares it."

The sage cursed his own wife to become a stone, adding: "You will not recognize my own form, my own unconscious gestures, or my movement, because your lustful heart has been fixed on another man." And he promised that she would be released when touched by the foot of Rama.⁵⁵

Narada compares Ahalya with the Shadow Samjna (Saranyu), and at one point Indra is said to be like the Sun, two rather casual references that link this sexual masquerade to that paradigmatic one. This time there is no ambiguity about Ahalya's deception, for Indra is actually said to become Gautama [*Gautamo bhut*], with Gautama's body, as usual, but now also with his voice and his unconscious gestures [*bhavas*], more intimate

⁵⁵ *Ganesha Purana, Upasana Khanda* (Bombay: Gopala Narayana Co., 1892), chap. 30, "The Violation of Ahalya," chap. 31, "The Description of Indra's Curse," and chaps. 32–33.

details that Indra does not usually take the trouble to copy. (It is Gautama's voice, too, that Ahalya fears when she anticipates his curse.)

What Indra fails to mimic, however, is the smell of mortality: the clue that makes Ahalya realize her mistake is Indra's celestial fragrance, a perfume produced by the absence of putrefying flesh. For although Indra has Gautama's form (*rūpa*) and shape (*vāpū*), these are visual qualities that would not include evidence for the other senses. Indra sounds like Gautama (he has Gautama's voice), and he looks like Gautama, but he doesn't smell like Gautama. Actually, Indra doesn't really act like Gautama, either: Ahalya remarks on his uncharacteristic lust, but she goes along with it—indeed, she does not notice the smell until he has kissed her, embraced her, untied her waistband, “and so forth”—the “so forth” apparently including enough to constitute a stain on her fidelity. Nor does Indra talk like Gautama, even though he has Gautama's voice: Ahalya could probably have guessed it was Indra by the fact that he threatens to curse and abandon her if she *does not* make love, the reverse of Gautama's predictable position. She might also have noted that, with a tactlessness characteristic of his cousin Zeus (*Iliad* 14.223), Indra propositions her by telling her how he has desired another woman and, later, keeps talking about his jealous wife: he identifies himself to Ahalya as “Indra, the husband of Indrani.”

The curse of becoming a stone is now explicitly glossed as the appropriate punishment for the crime of nonrecognition: now Ahalya will not be expected to recognize anyone's form or gestures (or movements, *ceshtitani*), all of which she herself will henceforth lack; in particular, she will not be able to recognize her husband, a petrification of the very flaw for which she is being petrified. This text is equally specific about the release from the curse: it is the touch of Rama's foot, not the mere sight of Rama or the words of Rama, that will release Ahalya.

In several South Indian variants of the story, Ahalya recognizes Indra. In Kampan's Tamil *Ramayana*, it is said that Indra “sneaked into the hermitage wearing the exact body of Gautama, whose heart knew no falsehoods. Sneaking in, he joined Ahalya; coupled, they drank deep of the clear new wine of first-night weddings, and she knew. Yet unable to put aside what was not hers, she dallied in her joy, but the sage did not tarry, he came back, a very Shiva with three eyes in his head.”⁵⁶ (In R. K. Narayan's retelling of Kampan's version of the story, “She surrendered herself, but at some stage realized that the man enjoying her was an impostor; but she could do nothing about it.”)⁵⁷ Here Gautama has not

⁵⁶ Kampan, *Ramayana*, cited and translated by A. K. Ramanujan, “Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation,” in *Many Ramayanas: The Diversity of Narrative Traditions in South Asia*, ed. Paula Richman (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1991), pp. 22–49, esp. p. 29.

⁵⁷ R. K. Narayan, *The Ramayana* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), p. 21.

merely the special gaze of ascetic inner heat but the extra eye of the great ascetic god, Shiva, in contrast with the promiscuously superfluous eyes of Indra.⁵⁸ He also shares Shiva's penchant for asceticism, as A. K. Ramanujan remarks: "In Kampan, Ahalya realizes she is doing wrong but cannot let go of the forbidden joy; the poem has also suggested earlier that her sage-husband is all spirit, details which together add a certain psychological subtlety to the seduction." In K. R. Srinivasa Iyengar's modern retelling, Ahalya maintains that she did not know Indra's identity.⁵⁹

But Ahalya's complicity, and Gautama's inadequacies, are developed in far greater detail in a highly sophisticated Telugu rendering which retells the story of Ahalya and Gautama without even bothering to pay lip service, as it were, to the idea of female fidelity; instead, it paints Indra and Ahalya as Romantic adulterers.⁶⁰ This Ahalya knows that someone else might have taken the form of Gautama, someone who is "like" not only Gautama but Indra, and, unlike the Ahalya whom Rama declared free of fault, she recognizes Indra when he expounds a hedonistic doctrine (echoing Ravana's line, to Vedavati, about losing her youth, though this time in an extended argument reminiscent of Fitzgerald's Omar Khayyam, or John Donne to his Coy Mistress), which Gautama never would have uttered. She recognizes the impostor because he desires her, and her husband does not. She recognizes Indra not by any particular sense, not because he looks or smells like Indra, but because he makes use of all of *his* senses in bed, unlike her husband. Gautama refuses to make love to her, arguing that it is *not* her fertile season. Yet, precisely because Indra says he loves her, she insists on knowing who he really is; otherwise, she says, it would be rape. The basic image of the woman turned into a stone is here predicted by Ahalya herself when she comments, as she contemplates succumbing to Indra, "A woman should turn herself to stone, and give up all thought of pleasure." Yet, just as Ahalya knows that her heart will melt at Indra's touch, so the stone Ahalya melts at Rama's touch.

ALCMENA

In the West, the Greek and Roman myth of the seduction of Alcmene by Zeus/Jupiter in the form of her husband, Amphitryon, has given its name to one variant of the sexual masquerade. Otto Rank, for instance, refers

⁵⁸ Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty, *Siva: The Erotic Ascetic* (London and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).

⁵⁹ R. K. Srinivasa Iyengar, *Sitayana: Epic of the Earth-Born* (Madras: Samata Books, 1987), canto 13.

⁶⁰ *Ahalyasankrandanam* of Venkata Krsnappa Nayakudu, trans. David Shulman, Velcheru Narayana Rao, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam in *Symbols of Substance: Court and State in Nayaka Period Tamil Nadu* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp. 145–68.

to it as “the Amphitryon motif,”⁶¹ though a less sexist title might be “the Alcmena motif” since her dilemma is the subject of the myth. The myth of Alcmena and Amphitryon has been reinterpreted throughout Western literature—notably by Plautus, Molière, Henrich von Kleist, and Jean Giraudoux—and each generation has found new meanings in it.

Zeus (or, later, Jupiter, the Roman name for the Greek god Zeus) is, like his cousin Indra, a trickster, implicated in a number of different sorts of sexual masquerades. The myth of Amphitryon is mentioned in enough Greek sources to make it clear that it was known, indeed well known, in Greek. Homer refers to “Amphitryon’s wife, Alcmena, who, after lying in love in the embraces of great Zeus, brought forth Herakles” (*Odyssey* 2.266–68), and in the *Iliad* (14.323) Zeus lists Alcmena among the women he seduced in his own person, but there is no talk here of a masquerade, nothing about fooling her with the form of Amphitryon. The seduction of Alcmena by Zeus was the subject of plays by Sophocles and Euripides which have perished⁶² and is told by Ovid, who says that Jove, as Amphitryon, “took” Alcmena,⁶³ using an ambiguous verb which we could take to mean either “tricked” or “had” sexually. Zeus here eschews both rape (his usual *modus operandi*) and bestiality (his second favorite); where the masquerade might often be regarded as an insult to a woman’s intelligence, here, at least, it is intended *not* to insult her fidelity.

The myth of Alcmena is in many ways a gendered reversal (and hence a reversal in other ways) of the myth of Saranyu: both Alcmena and Saranyu give birth to twins (male for Alcmena, male, male/female, and human/equine, for Saranyu) who have doubled parents. But where Saranyu’s twins have ambiguous mothers, Alcmena’s twins—Herakles and Iphikles—have different fathers. Plautus (followed by almost all subsequent versions—Kleist is an exception) maintains the tradition of the twins,⁶⁴ but now, in addition to telling one husband from the other, Alcmena must tell one son from the other. Plautus tells us that Hera, out of jealousy, sent two serpents (even the snakes are doubled!) to kill the infant boys; the infant Herakles strangled the monsters with his tiny hands, thereby proving his divine parentage. (Others say that Amphitryon himself put the two serpents with the children in order to determine which of

⁶¹ Otto Rank, *The Double: A Psychoanalytic Study*, trans. and ed. with an introduction by Harry Tucker, Jr. (New York: New American Library, 1971), p. 14.

⁶² *Tragicorum Graecorum Fragmenta*, ed. A. Nauck, 2d ed. (Frankfurt, 1889), pp. 156, 386 ff.

⁶³ Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Library, 1977), 6.112; for the Latin *cepit*, the Loeb translator gives “cheated.”

⁶⁴ Plautus, *Amphitryon: Three Plays in New Verse Translation* (Plautus, Molière, Kleist), *Together with a Comprehensive Account of the Evolution of the Legend and Its Subsequent History on the Stage*, trans. Charles E. Passage and James H. Martinband (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974), lines 103–10 and 480–94, pp. 43 and 61.

the twins was his own child.)⁶⁵ The terror of the infant Iphikles revealed that *he* was the mortal offspring—and therefore the one that Amphitryon wanted, claimed as his own. Unlike their fathers, apparently, the children are distinguished by their actions: the one who fights the snake is the son of Jupiter—that is, the *real* son of Zeus, his desired son, is the child of the *false* Amphitryon.

Does Alcmena desire Zeus? Plautus assumes that Alcmena did not knowingly sleep with someone other than her husband Amphitryon. He takes pains to have Mercury promise that no one will suspect her of adultery, that their love affair will remain a secret, and that Amphitryon will be told the whole story, so that no one will think Alcmena guilty.⁶⁶ So, too, in Euripides, when Amphitryon is about to burn Alcmena alive as an adulteress, Zeus descends as *deus ex machina* and sends thunder, lightning, and rain to avert the innocent woman's death.⁶⁷ But this, of course, proves only that Zeus, rather than some mere mortal, fathered her child, not that she thought he was Amphitryon. So, too, in the "interpolated scenes" composed by Cardinal Hermolaus Barbarus in 1480 C.E. in imitation of Plautus, as well as in Molière and Kleist, Amphitryon is told that Jupiter announced that he himself was Alcmena's secret lover and father of the baby who had strangled both the snakes (the other being Amphitryon's).

But Molière and Kleist imply that Alcmena suspected that she was in bed with someone other than her husband. In Molière's telling, Mercury implies that Alcmena was not seduced but actually initiated the whole affair herself, bringing Jupiter down from the skies "in the semblance that she cherished most in love."⁶⁸ As usual, the woman who was impregnated by the god is accused of adultery (like Mary by Joseph). Early Greek texts implied that Alcmena slept only with Zeus, not with Amphitryon. But it is essential for the later psychological variants of Molière and Kleist that she sleeps with both the god and the mortal, in order to raise the twin problems of knowledge (if she had not slept with Amphitryon, it is more likely that she would not have been able to tell him from Jupiter in bed) and jealousy ("Which did you like best?" Jupiter keeps asking). Kleist's Jupiter continually uses theological double-talk to confuse Alcmena as he impersonates himself. First of all, he keeps "pretending" to be Jupiter. He tells Alcmena that he is a god, that Juno had never pleased him so much in bed, and that he lives on the nectar of Alcmena's love.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Pherecydes, cited by Apollodorus, *The Library*, text and translation by J. G. Frazer, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Loeb Classical Library, 1921), 1.8.

⁶⁶ Plautus, *Amphitryon* (n. 64 above), lines 480–94, p. 61.

⁶⁷ Euripides, cited by Passage (n. 64 above), p. 11.

⁶⁸ Molière, *Amphitryon* (n. 64 above), lines 1691 ff.; Passage (n. 64 above), pp. 182–84.

⁶⁹ Kleist, *Amphitryon* (n. 64 above), act 2, scene 2.

This is yet another instance of Jupiter's persistent bad habit of mentioning one woman when he is in bed with another—a habit peculiarly designed to excite the jealousy of the women that he himself is so jealous of. And when he finally confesses, "It was no mortal man that came to you / Last night, but Jupiter himself, the god of thunder," Alcmena is too confused to recognize the truth when she sees it, and she berates "Amphitryon" ("you godless man") for blaming the gods for his own sacrilege. It could not have been a god, she argues, or else she would "perish in such radiance" and there would be no life coursing through her "warm heart" at that moment.⁷⁰

When she notices a difference between the two forms of Amphitryon, she interprets this as nothing but a heightening of Amphitryon himself, as if in a dream, larger than life, "more beautiful than ever / Last night," as if he were "his own picture, / A painting of him by an artist's hand, / Quite true to life, yet heightened to the godlike."⁷¹ She experiences great ambivalence between her feelings, which respond differently to Jupiter than they did to Amphitryon, and her mind, which is befogged by the arguments that they are the same person (arguments also reinforced by cognitive dissonance: if they are not the same person, she's an adulteress). Jupiter, in his own persona, confuses Alcmena even more by asking her how she would feel if she were, actually, in bed with him (the god) but still thought he was Amphitryon, and just then Amphitryon were to appear. Alcmena hedges: "Yes—I would then be sad, and I would wish / That he were the god, and that you would / Remain Amphitryon, as you surely are." Just as a woman who is raped might think of her husband in an attempt to remain faithful, Alcmena recognizes only her husband in an attempt to remain innocent.

Alcmena finally chooses the wrong one, Jupiter. When she realizes her mistake, she pleads with Jupiter, "Leave me forever in my error if / Your light is not to shade my soul forever." The imagery of light and shade and soul implies that the error in which Alcmena wishes to remain consists in believing, wrongly, that the man she has made love with was just her husband; she is asking to be protected from looking on the face of god-head directly. This seems to satisfy Jupiter at last, for he reveals his true identity and blesses them all.

AHALYA AND ALCMENA

Ahalya is innocent in early tellings, guilty in later tellings, when she clearly recognizes Indra and sleeps with him anyway. Alcmena is usu-

⁷⁰ Ibid., scene 5.

⁷¹ Ibid., scene 4.

ally assumed to be innocent; she only realizes what is happening when both Amphytrions confront one another, as the double Sitas and Helens do in certain texts, and Ahalya's husband(s) only in one or two.

But, though I have chosen, for my present purposes, to look closely at the women, Ahalya and Alcmena (and Sita and Helen), this somewhat distorts the texts. In fact, the mythologies devote more time to the men than to the women, in particular to the quandary of Zeus/Jupiter in wanting to be loved for himself and to the quandary of Indra, whose various mutilations are described at some length. Zeus gets away with it, mostly; Indra does not. Zeus suffers inner torment, while Indra is physically mutilated (as is Ahalya, who also suffers inner torment in some texts).

The Hindu tradition regards Indra's suffering and restoration as a ritual problem, involving, first, the sacrifice of a ram, and later, visits to various Hindu shrines. The Greek tradition, divorced from any ritual specific to the text, treats the theme of Zeus's suffering in the realm of theology. Yet, at the time of the composition of most of these texts, Indra was no longer worshiped and had been supplanted by other gods; Zeus, on the other hand, at least at the beginning of the tradition, was still God, and texts composed within European traditions where he was no longer God began to treat him with less and less reverence. Ahalya remains a part of the Hindu wedding ritual tradition to this day, where she is literally the *touchstone* of wifely fidelity, while Alcmena, and even Amphytrion, are largely forgotten.

The point of the Greek myth is to justify the divine parentage of the son that results from the seduction of Alcmena—Herakles—while no child results from the seduction of Ahalya. And this is worthy of note since so many Hindu stories of divine seductions are, like the Greek tale of Alcmena (and other, similar tales, explaining the divine parentage of Achilles, Sarpedon, etc.), precisely designed to justify the divine parentage of sons, such as the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*. The Greek tradition, rationalist even at the start, debates this point: Semele's story about the divine birth of Dionysus is challenged (though ultimately affirmed), while the divine parentage of the Pandavas is accepted without question.

DID SHE FALL, OR WAS SHE PUSHED?

When we compare the myths of Ahalya and Alcmena, Sita and Helen, certain interesting patterns emerge. Ahalya is to Alcmena, not as Sita is to Helen, but as Helen is to Sita; that is, Ahalya is, like Helen, the paradigmatic beauty and paradigmatic whore in Hindu civilization, directly contrasted (even in her name) with Sita: Sita was born from a furrow that her father was plowing; Ahalya, by contrast, whose name means "not to be plowed," is the field that is plowed by one man too many, a

significant designation, given the importance in Hinduism of the agricultural metaphor of the legitimate wife as the field that belongs to her husband. Alcmena, in contrast, becomes a paragon and paradigm of virtue in Greek and European mythology, like Sita in Hindu mythology. Where Indra, in some texts, first tries in vain to seduce Ahalya in his own form and only then resorts to the device of impersonating her husband, Jupiter succeeds first in impersonating Alcmena's husband and only afterward tries, in vain, to seduce her in his own form. Together, the two sets of myths provide double paradigms for two cultures, one virtuous woman and one whore per culture. Yet they assign different sorts of stories to the two women: the whore is given the shadow double in Greece and falls for the god in Hinduism, while the chaste wife is given the shadow double in Hinduism and falls for the god in Greece.

On the surface, the texts seem to be saying that the woman who is fooled is innocent: the innocent Sita is fooled by Ravana, while the guilty Helen fools the other Greeks; the innocent Alcmena is fooled, while the guilty Ahalya is not. But, in fact, the woman who is fooled is often said to be guilty, too; heads she loses, tails she loses. The narrators of these stories do not regard the women who are fooled as morally superior to men. On the contrary. For in addition to distinguishing between stories in which women are fooled (Alcmena, mostly) and stories in which they are not (Ahalya, sometimes), we must further subdivide this second group into stories in which the woman (like Sita with Ravana) is not fooled and therefore resists the masquerading god, and stories (like other versions of the tale of Ahalya) in which the woman, still not fooled, nevertheless goes ahead and sleeps with the masquerading god. In this latter variant, though the end result is the same as that of the woman who is fooled, the woman is far worse than foolish: she is a knowing and complicitous pseudovictim. The accusation that the woman pretends to be fooled when in fact she is not fooled floats just under the surface of the long history of the myths of Alcmena and Ahalya.

For when a woman is the victim of a masquerade, the text often asks: "Was she really fooled?" It is as if the texts assume that women are always the tricksters, never the victims, and therefore that any apparent counterinstance must be justified by arguing that the woman was not, in fact, victimized, that even when she appears to be the victim her trick consists in pretending to be tricked by the trickster. You can't snow the snowman, but you can't cheat an honest (wo)man, either. And when women are not being blamed for being too cunning to be tricked, they are blamed for being so stupid that they can be tricked. The argument that "she really knew" plays precisely the role in myths in which men trick women as the argument that "she asked for it" plays in sexist discussions of rape: it shifts the blame from the perpetrator to the victim.

CONCLUSION

I have argued here primarily for cross-cultural, rather than universalistic, comparisons: I have stressed factors that these two cultures, ancient Greek and Hindu, have in common in part from their hypothetically shared proto-Indo-European heritage or from cultural contact between Greece and India. But they also share factors that transcend cultural barriers. We may isolate certain contrasting patterns in the behavior of men and women in comparable situations and a number of clear asymmetries of gender in the depiction of woman as objects. We have noted, for instance, that the stories assume that the men are fooled (by Sita and Helen) and that the women (Ahalya and Alcmena) are not; when the women seem to be fooled, the story questions whether or not they are faking it. The women (Sita and Helen) produce doubles in order to get away from the men who pursue them, in order not to be in a particular bed; the men (Zeus and Indra) masquerade in order to get into a bed where they are not wanted. This may be because both biology and society conspire to produce situations in which men, more often than women, aggressively seek sexual encounters—women are more often raped than raping—or simply because *stories* emphasize male seduction over female seduction. And although the initial premise is the same in variants where women double or men masquerade—a man wishes to sleep with a woman against her will—when *she* produces the double she avoids the encounter (because she outnumbers him two to one), while when *he* produces the double she is tricked into the encounter (because he outnumbers her two to one).

What similarities there are in these stories are there because men in different cultures depict women in similar ways (and as different from men). I think these contrasting stories show that differences in gender are more significant than differences in culture: women in Hindu stories are more like women in Greek stories than they are like men in Hindu stories. The women resemble one another, across cultures, in certain ways more than they resemble the men within their own cultures. That is, gender transcends culture in establishing lines of convergences between texts that tell the same sorts of stories about men and women in different cultures. It is easier to transform a Hindu story about a woman into a Greek story about a woman (or the reverse) than to transform the tale of a doubled woman into the tale of a doubled man in the same culture. We began by assuming that the two sets of texts, Hindu and Greek, were shadows of one another; and we may conclude by noting that in each set of texts, culture is the shadow of gender.